



**MARION COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
WORK SESSION**

**Economic Development Program Update
Minutes**

Tuesday, August 18, 2026, 1:30 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.
Commissioners' Boardroom
Courthouse Square, 555 Court St. NE, Suite 5231
Salem, Oregon 97301

ATTENDANCE:

Commissioners: Danielle Bethell and Colm Willis.

Board's Office: Jonathan Sanford, Trevor Lane, Toni Whitler and Matt Lawyer.

Legal Counsel: Jennifer Rodgers.

Community and Economic Development (CED): Sarah Cooley, Chip Bury, and Ashely Jackson.

Marion and Polk Early Learning Hub: Lisa Harnisch, and Margie Lowe.

Commissioner Colm Willis called the meeting to order at 1:36 p.m.

1. Welcome & Introductions

-Commissioner Colm Willis

2. Dolly Parton Imagination Library

-Lisa Harnisch, Executive Director and Margie Lowe, Project Lead

- Program performance in Marion and Polk Counties:
 - Focus on Marion County-funded zip codes.
- Over 13,000 children served across approximately 22 zip codes:
 - 9 of which are funded by Marion County.
- Participation highlights:
 - NE Salem is the largest and highest-need zip code:
 - 1,000+ active children enrolled.
 - Woodburn has strong participation and growth.
 - Smaller communities have participation rates reaching 60% of eligible kids.
- Cost and commitment overview:
 - Detailed cost tables by zip code show:
 - Current monthly program costs per zip code.
 - Remaining months of eligibility for each enrolled child.
 - Total cost if enrollment stopped but current kids were served to age five.
 - In Marion County's eight remaining unfunded zip codes:
 - Sustaining current participants would cost ~\$35,000.
 - Projected increase of about \$6,400/year as enrollment keeps to grow.
- Program design and content:

- Children receive age-appropriate books from birth until their 5th birthday:
 - About 60 books if enrolled from birth.
 - Includes caregiver guidance on how to engage children in repeated readings:
 - Early literacy coaching built into the book.
 - English/Spanish option exists:
 - Used by Spanish and English-speaking families.
- Literacy outcomes and research context:
 - Third-grade literacy scores in Marion County areas without access to program:
 - Range from 9–39%.
 - Salem-Keizer is around 24%.
 - Gervais is 39%
 - Communities with a decade or more of access have stronger third-grade literacy scores.
 - External research:
 - Kids in the program for 12+ months show significantly higher early literacy skills and kindergarten readiness than non-participants.
- Key concerns and discussion:
 - Concern about low third-grade literacy proficiency locally and implications for long-term educational and economic outcomes.
 - ~75% of third graders in some areas are not meeting basic literacy benchmarks:
 - Concerns that system responses are too process-focused and slow.
 - Desire to extend book access beyond age five:
 - Develop similar program.
 - Books through early elementary grades.
 - Current program rules stop at age five.
 - Without readers, there are fewer learners and weaker workforce outcomes.
- Collaboration and broader literacy strategy:
 - The Imagination Library is one of many literacy strategies in place, alongside:
 - Ready for Kindergarten programs.
 - Literacy nights and playgroups.
 - Shared professional development across pre-K, child care, and K–12:
 - Recent emphasis on science of reading.
 - Partnerships with libraries, health providers, and pre-K systems
 - “Talk, Read, Sing” effort to promote everyday literacy interactions.
 - Ongoing collaboration with the local school district includes:
 - Funded staff to coordinate kindergarten transition work.
 - Parent education and joint trainings.
 - Joint focus on science-of-reading aligned curriculum and practice.
- Funding and sustainability:
 - State matching funds now cover 50% of book costs.
 - Invoices are split automatically by Dollywood and State of Oregon.
 - Local funding sources include:
 - County grants.
 - Foundation support.
 - Events.
 - Bottle drop fundraising.
 - Fred Meyer Community Rewards.
 - Volunteer-led fundraising.
 - Early Learning Hub is relatively new to fundraising:
 - Building internal development capacity.
- Data, Return on Investment (ROI), and expectations:
 - Request clearer ROI:

- Not just registration counts:
 - Evidence of engagement and educational impact.
- Link program participation data with third-grade literacy outcomes once cohorts reach testing age.
- Hear from home visitors/teachers who see conditions in kid's homes:
 - Can speak to changes in presence and use of books.
- Local outcome data is not available as regional program is ~4 years old:
 - First cohorts are reaching testing years.
 - Early participation started below 20%.

3. Opal Creek Opportunity Program

-Chip Bury

- Approximately \$12 million in Opal Creek funds remain to be deployed.
- Funds originate from federal legislation (1996) with specific parameters:
 - Benefit communities in vicinity of Opal Creek area.
 - At least one of the following must be met:
 - Enhance natural, scenic, recreational, historic, or cultural resources in communities.
 - Support local community economies.
 - Increase protection of drinking water sources for the communities.
- Guidance from state and federal partners:
 - Conversations with Business Oregon and U.S. Forest Service clarified that:
 - Cannot get full \$12 million as single block without project-level detail.
 - County must propose specific projects that meet statutory guidelines.
 - Must be transparent:
 - Clear criteria and documentation of how projects meet federal and legislative parameters.
- Existing work and concerns:
 - Previous public process produced extensive list of community proposals.
 - Frustration that after significant community engagement and consultant work:
 - Pressure to run another full call.
 - Board expressed resistance to duplicating that process.
 - County has successfully advanced some projects:
 - Detroit marinas and public works radio project.
 - Positively received by funding agencies.
- Program structure and direction:
 - Not required to create separate, Emergent Economic Opportunity Program (EEOP)-like grant program or a new advisory committee to access funds.
 - The board prefers to:
 - Identify priority projects using existing list and strategic priorities.
 - Submit projects individually to Business Oregon/Forest Service to confirm compliance.

4. Community Prosperity Initiative

-Ashley Jackson

- Update on city agreements and performance:
 - Fund cycle goes to June 2027 for cities that opted for year-at-a-time funds.
 - Program focus areas:
 - Parks and facility improvements.
 - Small business support.
 - Tourism activities.

- Community events.
 - New reporting templates have significantly improved:
 - Tracking of project progress and expenditures.
 - Communication with cities about expectations and deadlines.
- City-specific issues:
 - Gates and Gervais:
 - Excluded from current funding cycle:
 - Due to lack of adequate reporting on 2020–2023 funds.
 - Gates not able to provide necessary documentation of prior spending.
 - Gervais reports staff and council turnover:
 - Difficulty tracing historical expenditures.
 - Has not produced complete records.
 - Concern about accountability:
 - No new funding until documentation and planning capacity provided.
 - Keizer:
 - Concerns of shifting project scopes:
 - Improvements at Little League facility.
 - Financial benefits may accrue to private, out-of-state operator.
 - Object to county dollars subsidizing private operator without clear community benefit or transparency.
 - Commissioners requested clarification on:
 - Who operates and benefits from concession infrastructure.
 - How previous planned projects have or have not advanced.
 - Silverton:
 - Concern about city plans to pass through county funds to regional economic development organization rather than direct local projects.
 - Prefer county dollars support local initiatives:
 - Not supplant city budget items or other contracts.
- Positive examples:
 - Sensory playground in Aumsville highlighted as a strong example of:
 - Direct community benefit.
 - Equity-focused design for children with visual and physical limitations.
 - Support for cities using funds transparently for community-focused projects.

5. Discussion

-All

- Overarching themes:
 - Accountability, measurable outcomes, and clear ROI for all economic development and community grant programs.
 - Literacy, early childhood development, and community infrastructure investments are tied to long-term economic development.
 - Concern of funding organizations and jurisdictions without evidence of impact or strong financial stewardship.
- Specific discussions included:
 - Make literacy and early-learning investments tied to long-term outcomes.
 - Reframe message for families around broader benefits of early literacy rather than only test scores.
 - Connect with community members who see conditions on the ground:
 - Validate if programs are changing use of books in homes.
 - How to structure county programs so that funds do not supplant local responsibilities:

- Rather augment community capacity and fill genuine gaps.

6. Other

-All

- EEOP-related requests:
 - Approve Santana Village Park Association to submit application for 20×36 covered picnic shelter:
 - Support a park with limited shade.
 - Approve community dining program to submit application to replace aging commercial kitchen equipment:
 - Condition that application clearly identify:
 - All other funding partners.
 - How program benefits the wider community.
- Reporting expectations for regional partners:
 - Regional economic development organization provide written performance report instead of in-person presentation:
 - Outlining outcomes and any planned improvements.

7. Next Steps

-All

- Dolly Parton Imagination Library / Literacy:
 - Submit new 3-year funding application for Imagination Library, including:
 - Clear metrics and baselines from prior funding cycle.
 - Proposed outcome measures for the next three years.
 - Explore extending book access beyond age 5 at upcoming statewide Imagination Library coordinators' meeting:
 - Explore options for local similar follow-on program for older children.
 - Consult with school district to explore if participation data in early zip codes can be associated with third grade literacy scores over time.
 - Gather qualitative concrete input from home visitors, early educators, and kindergarten teachers on book presence and use in homes:
 - Share synthesized findings with the board.
- Opal Creek Opportunity Program:
 - Place an item on a future BOCCAO agenda for the three commissioners to:
 - Set clear priority categories for Opal Creek funds.
 - Identify initial priority projects from existing community project list.
 - Submit project specific proposals to Business Oregon and U.S. Forest Service:
 - To confirm statutory alignment and secure funding.
- Community Prosperity Initiative and City Funding:
 - Draft new agreements for all eligible cities:
 - Except Gates, Gervais, and Keizer.
 - Use updated reporting templates and accountability expectations.
 - Notify Gates and Gervais that no additional Community Prosperity Initiative funds will be awarded until:
 - Complete documentation of 2020–2023 expenditures is provided.
 - A clear project plan for future funds is submitted.
 - For Keizer and any similar requests:
 - Obtain information on who operates and benefits from shared facilities.
 - Require justification for scope changes or abandoned projects before making recommendations to board.
 - For all participating cities, incorporate into future requests a requirement to:

- Explain why any previously approved projects were not completed.
 - Clarify if county funds are augmenting/supplanting city or other funds.
- EEOP / Other Requests:
 - Invite Santana Village Park Association to submit EEOP application for covered picnic shelter:
 - Provide staff support as needed.
 - Invite community dining program to submit EEOP application for replacement commercial kitchen equipment, requiring:
 - List of all other funding partners and committed contributions.
 - Clear description of community benefits and target populations.
 - Request written performance report from regional economic development organization summarizing outcomes under current contract and outlining planned improvements.

Adjourned – time: 2:47 p.m.

Minutes by: Mary Vityukova

Reviewed by: Gary L. White